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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire survey of parents and teachers at a small, private alternative school in Roanoke, Virginia, compared the two groups' attitudes toward and perceptions of the school. Data were gathered from 27 past teachers and 60 past and present parents at the school on their age, sex, educational experience, number of children at the school, teaching experience, perceptions of the school's differences from traditional education, and satisfaction with the school's performance. Stepwise discriminant analysis allowed the two groups to be clearly distinguished in terms of their attitudes toward the school. The results showed that parents saw this alternative school as less different from traditional schools than did the teachers. Further, parents were more satisfied than the teachers with the school and its philosophy, their own participation in the school, and the children's academic and personal progress. (RW)

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DISCRIMINATING BETWEEN PARENT AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

A search for alternative forms of education has been a prominent feature of American education for the past twenty years. This quest has resulted in the creation of many private and public alternative schools and educational programs. Parents and teachers have played a central role in the founding and development of many of the newly formed alternative schools. Survival of an alternative school is, in large measure, dependent upon effective incorporation of parents' and teachers' values and roles into the school's programs. Parents and teachers are likely to have different views concerning a school's characteristics and such differences influence the functioning of the school. This report identifies and discusses the implications of the characteristics which discriminate between parents and teachers of one private alternative school.

A large number of alternative schools were created in the past two decades. In many instances the movement was fostered by persons who saw public school systems as monolithic and unresponsive to student needs. Many of these schools failed because of ambiguous philosophies and the absence of clear delineations of responsibility among faculty, administrators, and parents. Parents of alternative school students were often frustrated by the gap between their expectations and actual outcome; teachers were plagued with low salaries and emotional and physical exhaustion resulting in "teacher burn-out" (2, 3, 4).

The surviving schools were able to determine and effectively deal with the parents' and teachers' values and roles. Several characteristics have been identified as significant in assessing parent and teacher roles in the survival of alternative schools. Firestone (2) identified several areas of concern to parents and teachers in his study of three co-op free schools. His report cited: 1) the parents' role in determining policy; 2) the working relationship between parents and teachers; 3) the teacher's behavior in the classroom and her control of the activities in the classroom; 4) the school's philosophy statement and the implementation of this philosophy; and 5) the conflict inherent in a policy of maximizing student instruction and student freedom.

As teachers and researchers in an alternative school we saw teachers and parents struggling with these same issues and other similar issues. A study of the school's parent and teacher groups was conducted to determine which school characteristics were important to

both groups, what they saw as different about the school, and what were their primary areas of satisfaction with the school. This report also identifies those characteristics which discriminate the members of the parent from the members of the teacher group. Differences between parents and teachers encompass issues critical to the survival of an alternative school.

SETTING

Community School is a small, private alternative school in Roanoke, Virginia. It was established in 1971 by several teachers and a group of parents who were seeking a flexible school environment for their children. In an effort to build a sense of community among teachers, parents and students, the school has remained small, maintaining an annual average of approximately sixty students and eight to nine staff members.

Numerous characteristics have distinguished Community School from conventional schools. The philosophy of the school has been dedicated to the growth of the whole person. Affective learning has been judged to be as important as cognitive learning. All students have been expected to study human relations along with math, language arts and science. Creative opportunities were available in art, carpentry, photography, dramatics, body-awareness and puppetry.

Students did not receive grades nor were they tested for peer comparisons. Development of a positive self-concept was deemed a necessary foundation for learning in all fields of study. Parents, students, and teachers participated together in individual evaluation conferences

to discuss each student's progress. The evaluation process was the school's attempt to have stated philosophy and school practices integrate effectively for each person.

Students at the school were not placed in groups by grade level nor were they led through graded textbooks at a predetermined rate. They were placed in vertical groupings with a three to four year age span. Curriculum choices were available at all levels and students participated with faculty in making decisions concerning learning activities, evaluations, and school rules. Experiential learning was encouraged whenever possible. Parents had informal and formal opportunities to observe school activities and suggest ideas for altering programs. Nevertheless, parent involvement was insufficient to provide them with a firm basis for making effective suggestions. For most parents, participation in the school focused on attendance at student evaluation sessions and school-wide activity days.

METHODOLOGY

Teacher Sample

The authors designed a questionnaire which was sent to the 30 teachers who had worked at Community School from September 1971 to June 1977. The major purpose of the questionnaire was to determine the extent to which teachers viewed the school as an alternative for themselves and to determine teacher needs and expectations related to an alternative educational setting. Although some questions were open-ended, most were short answer check lists or continua. A return rate of 85% (27) demonstrated that the teachers had a continuing interest in the school.

Parent Sample

After completing a review and analysis of the teacher data, a similar questionnaire was sent to the 240 parents of students who attended the school for any period between September 1971 and June 1977. Sixty parents representing fifty-eight students responded to the questionnaire. The purpose of the parent questionnaire was to determine the parents' views concerning alternative education and their roles in the school.

RESULTS

Teacher Data

Of the 27 teachers returning the questionnaire, 19 were female and 8 were male. The responses revealed a highly educated group. All but four held undergraduate degrees, eleven had master's degrees, two had earned doctorates and several were pursuing graduate studies. In regard to their own K-12 schooling, the majority had attended public school although 44% had attended private schools for varying periods. The teachers gave a positive evaluation of their own schooling, except for graduate studies, about which there was mixed reaction.

The average age of the staff was 33 years. There were no minority teachers. Eleven teachers had a total of 35 years of public school teaching experience. Nine teachers had a total of 28 years of private school teaching experience and two teachers had between them six years teaching in the Peace Corps. Seven teachers had no previous classroom teaching experience. The teachers had little knowledge and experience in alternative education before they came to Community School.

Teachers accepted positions at the school because of its student centered philosophy, opportunities to pursue graduate studies, and because the school provided a humanistic environment with an emphasis on flexible learning and teaching arrangements. Some were interested in working at the school because their children were enrolled. Most teachers expected to stay at the school two years or less.

The teachers indicated a high degree of teacher "burnout" resulting from the intensity of teaching in an alternative school. The turnover rate varied from a low of 30% to high of 63.6% per year. The average duration of service was 19.6 months which is not quite two full academic years. Salaries averaging $5,000 per year may have contributed to the high turnover rate.

After the teachers left Community School only one chose to teach in another private school. Of the remaining teachers, five returned to graduate school, and the rest pursued jobs in such different areas as counseling, woodworking, farming, and oil painting. This ability and willingness to go into diverse areas may have been an outgrowth of the personal growth the teachers reported experiencing at the school. The teachers gave a high satisfaction rating (4.7 on a six point scale) to their school related personal growth.

Parent Data

Of the sixty parents responding, 27 were male and 33 were female. The average age of the parents was 38 years. The average age of their children when entering Community School was 8.5 years. Of the parents responding, 31 had children enrolled in the school, three had children

who graduated and 24 had children who had transferred to other schools. The parents were a highly educated group with an average of 16 years of schooling completed; 63% had undergraduate degrees, 10% had masters degrees, and 10% held doctorates.

The attitude of the parents was more positive toward the Community School experience than towards their own schooling or their children's previous schooling. Before becoming involved with Community School the parents had little knowledge of alternative schools.

Many reasons were cited by the parents for sending their children to Community School. One-fourth of the group referred to negative school situations which they or their child wanted to leave. Parents seemed to be looking for an environment that motivated and challenged their children to learn and that promoted individuality, creativity, self-worth, and freedom. Some wanted a smaller school than public or other private schools provided. Some especially liked the emphasis on affective education at Community School.

If Community School had not been available, most of the parents (55%) said they would have sent their children to public schools. Twenty-six percent of the parents would have chosen another private school. The rest were uncertain. Forty-one percent of the parents expected their children to stay at Community School for three years or more. Sixteen percent thought the stay would be two years; seven percent said one year and two percent said less than one year. Thirty-four percent did not have an expectation concerning time.

The parents were asked what was or would be their major reason for taking their children out of Community School. The most mentioned

reason was a desire for a larger peer group for the students. Other reasons, in order of frequency mentioned, were weak academics and curriculum, carpooling difficulties, financial pressures, a need for more structure and discipline, a need for extracurricular activities, and a need for the students to prepare for college.

The parents whose children had left Community School were asked to characterize the students' adjustment to the new setting. They rated their students' average academic adjustment as 4.5 on a six-point scale and their average social adjustment as 4.8. Parents were also asked about their children's preparation in academic skills when they left Community School. On a six point scale with 1 representing below the appropriate level of preparation and 6 representing above the appropriate level, the average rating by parents was 3.7. Fifty-two percent of the parent group said they would send their children to another alternative school; 14% said they would not; and 34% were undecided.

Data Analysis and Tabulation

The teacher data and parent data were analyzed separately to obtain profiles of the two groups. Each item was on a continuum where 1 was the lowest and 6 the highest choice. Thirty-nine items on the two questionnaires were identical and are presented, along with mean response values for teachers and parents, in Table 1. To determine the extent to which these questionnaires permitted distinguishing between parents and teachers, a stepwise discriminant analysis was performed using the program, DISCRIM (1), with equal probabilities for group membership.

Comparison of Teacher and Parent Data

The teacher and parent groups were compared on 39 items. The items were divided into five categories: 1) personal school experience; 2) differences between Community School and other school settings; 3) satisfaction with Community School; 4) influence of different Community School groups; and 5) student progress at Community School. The difference and satisfaction questions involved rating an identical list of characteristics.

The means, standard deviations, and F values for each of the 39 comparative items are reported in Table 1. The value for each item was assigned a weight of 1, the lowest, to 6, the highest, on the continuum. The mean values for parents have a high of 5.25 for grading practice differences and a low of 1.88 for experience with alternative schools. The teachers' mean scores ranged from a high of 5.48 for grading practice differences to a low of 1.89 for the influence of the Board of Directors.

Personal School Experience. The teachers rated their own schooling experiences more positively than did parents. Also, the teachers gave a high positive rating to their previous teaching experience while parents gave their children's previous school experience a lower, but still positive rating.

Differences. Overall, the teachers saw the school as slightly more different from other schools than did the parents. Only for the areas of student self-direction, teacher concern for students, parent participation and freedom did the parents see the school as more

different from other schools than the teachers. Parents saw the greatest differences in curriculum, freedom, and grading practices, while the teachers perceived the greatest difference to be grading practices.

Satisfaction. On the satisfaction items, the teachers were much less satisfied than the parents in every category except the decision-making role of teachers which was rated almost identically by teachers and parents. The items where the greatest difference in satisfaction occurred between parents' and teachers' ratings were student self-direction, student behavior, freedom, grading practices, and school goals.

Influence. Parents and teachers were very close on their ratings of the groups which had influence over the day-to-day activities within the school. Both groups perceived the Board as having the least influence while they rated the teachers as most influential. Neither the teachers nor the parents considered the parent group to have much influence.

Student progress. Parents were more satisfied than teachers with student progress in the areas of learning academic subject matter, personal growth in human relationships and self-awareness, and personal conduct. The greatest difference in teachers' and parents' scores was on the student personal conduct item. Teachers rated the item at 2.9 and parents at 4.8.

Discrimination Between Parents and Teachers

The results from the discriminant analysis show that the teachers and parents represented distinct populations and that an individual

could be classified with considerable accuracy as a parent or teacher from the responses to the questionnaires. The prediction results are reported in Table 2. Overall, the questionnaires were very effective in discriminating between groups with 88.51% correct classifications.

Fifteen items of the original 39 constituted the final discriminant function and are reported in Table 3. Each of the five categories (personal, difference, satisfaction, influence, student progress) were represented by at least one item in the final list. Of the 15 items representing the five areas, eight were related to school organization and seven were related to student learning and growth.

The function also includes two items related to student progress: personal growth in human relations and self-awareness (V38), and personal conduct (V39). Learning academic subject matter (V37) is not in the final list but is integrated and correlated with several items in Table 3 such as satisfaction with curriculum (V25) and differences in grading practices (V15). Also, this area (V37) is highly influenced by student behavior (V6), and personal conduct (V39), which are considered good parent/teacher discriminators.

In addition, there were eleven variables with significant F values ($.01 \leq F \leq .05$). These variables are noted in Table 1. Again, each of the questionnaire's five categories were represented by at least one item. Four of these items were in the final discriminant function: secondary school experience (V2), difference in student

self direction (V5), student personal growth in human relations and self-awareness (V38) and student personal conduct (V39).

It is important to also note that the four significant values among the satisfaction variables were related to management and behavior of students. These topics were consistently important to both teachers and parents. Finally, among the difference variables for teachers and parents, teacher concern for students was a significant item. This is important because teacher concern for students is an important dimension of both the written and informal philosophies of the school. The items from the discriminant function and those with significant F values encompass major dimensions of the school that are useful in discriminating between teachers and parents.

Conclusion

Community School has survived. The teachers and parents have continually changed and as groups their impact on the evolution of the school has been substantially different. Several important characteristics that contributed to the school's survival were revealed in the teacher profile, the parent profile, and in the discrimination of parents from teachers. As indicated in this study parents and teachers at Community School could be easily discriminated through the analysis of a small number of characteristics related to their perceptions and viewpoints concerning the school.

In general, parents saw the school as being less different from other schools than did the teachers, but were more satisfied

with the school than the teachers. Furthermore, parents were more satisfied with parent participation in the school than were the teachers. This discrepancy on satisfaction with parent participation points to a need for teachers and parents to clarify expectations concerning the role of parents in formulating school policy and involvement in school activities. Teacher expectations of parent participation are critical to a good working relationship between teachers and parents.

Parents were quite satisfied with the academic and personal growth of their children. Due to this satisfaction most parents were willing to let the teachers do the teaching. The teachers, however, were not as satisfied with the students' academic performance nor with the evaluation of students.

Parents appeared to be satisfied with the implementation of what they considered to be the school's philosophy, but at the same time claimed to know less than the teachers about alternative education. Even though parents knew less about alternative education and expressed satisfaction with the school's philosophy, this did not prevent requests each year from some parents for a fully developed, written statement of the ideals and goals of the school. These requests caused teachers great concern since they had primary responsibility for putting the ideals and goals into action. Teachers faced the difficulty of deciding when academic requirements and behavior controls would enhance learning rather than constrain the personal freedom and choice desired by many parents for their

children. Parents need to become aware of how difficult it is to apply a school philosophy.

The findings of this study correspond to many of the issues identified by Firestone (2) concerning parent and teacher roles in the survival of alternative schools. While Community School has survived through a trial and error search for effective working relationships between parents and teachers, it is our hope that this research will help in the development of a more systematic approach to productive communication between parents and teachers. Parent and teacher understanding of their respective roles and views is necessary for alternative schools to move beyond survival into the realization of their educational aspirations and goals.

TABLE 1

Questionnaire Variables Measured

	VARIABLES	PARENTS (N=60) MEAN	SD	TEACHERS (N=27) MEAN	SD	F
PERSONAL						
V1	elementary school experience	4.2	1.55	4.74	1.29	2.5
V2	secondary school experience	4.03	1.74	4.89	1.09	5.55*
V3	prior knowledge of alternative schools	3.12	1.62	3.15	1.46	.007
V4	experience with alternative schools	1.88	1.43	2.04	1.51	.21
DIFFERENCE						
V5	student self direction	4.87	1.14	4.19	1.00	7.14*
V6	student behavior	4.17	1.51	4.22	1.15	.03
V7	administrator leadership	4.68	1.42	4.93	1.24	.59
V8	teacher concern for students	4.88	1.52	4.11	1.40	5.05*
V9	parent participation	3.68	1.74	3.52	1.42	.19
V10	freedom	5.0	1.33	4.89	.97	.15
V11	decision-making role of teachers	4.58	1.70	4.96	1.29	1.07
V12	curriculum	4.95	1.24	5.07	.78	.23
V13	flexibility of organizational structure	4.68	1.85	4.93	1.21	.39
V14	teacher regulation of students	4.27	1.51	4.37	1.28	.097

TABLE 1 (cont)

VARIABLES	PARENTS (N=60) MEAN	SD	TEACHERS (N=27) MEAN	SD	F
V15 grading practices	5.25	1.41	5.48	.70	.65
V16 evaluation of teachers	3.85	2.22	4.67	1.44	3.07
V17 school goals	4.72	1.67	4.96	1.06	.497
SATISFACTION					
V18 student self direction	4.55	1.25	2.78	1.22	37.80*
V19 student behavior	4.18	1.55	2.78	1.19	17.60*
V20 administrator leadership	4.82	1.58	4.56	1.34	.56
V21 teacher concern for students	5.12	1.37	4.63	1.11	2.63
V22 parent participation	3.55	1.63	3.22	1.42	.81
V23 freedom	4.48	1.37	3.7	1.75	5.05*
V24 decision making role of teachers	4.62	1.46	4.63	1.24	.002
V25 curriculum	3.88	1.80	3.59	1.31	.57
V26 flexibility of organizational structure	4.67	1.86	4.22	1.28	.76
V27 teacher regulation of students	4.08	1.71	2.63	1.08	16.49*
V28 grading practices	4.57	1.64	3.97	1.16	2.98
V29 evaluation of teachers	3.62	2.1	3.33	1.75	.37
V30 school goals	4.53	1.84	3.63	1.69	4.73*

TABLE 1 (cont)

VARIABLES	PARENTS (N=60) MEAN	SD	TEACHERS (N=27) MEAN	SD	F
INFLUENCE					
V31 students	4.02	1.50	4.07	1.38	.03
V32 parents	2.38	1.43	2.26	1.35	.15
V33 teachers	4.90	1.37	4.37	1.55	2.56
V34 director	4.58	1.92	4.11	1.55	1.25
V35 secretary	2.80	1.93	2.85	1.77	.01
V36 board	2.22	1.71	1.89	1.55	.72
STUDENT PROGRESS					
V37 learning academic subjects	4.17	1.51	3.19	1.33	8.45*
V38 personal growth in human relationships and self-awareness	5.0	1.37	4.11	1.45	7.59*
V39 personal conduct	4.8	1.46	2.93	1.38	31.68*

* significant at .05

TABLE 2

Prediction Results

Group	No. of Cases	Predicted Group Membership	
		Parents	Teachers
Group 1-Parents	60	53 88.3%	7 11.7%
Group 2-Teachers	27	3 11.1%	24 88.9%

Percent of Correct Classifications	88.51%

Final F	Degrees of Freedom		Significance
6.64	15	71.00	$P = (1.28)\ 10^{-8}$

TABLE 3

Variables in Final Discriminant Function

PERSONAL		COEFFICIENTS
V2	secondary school experience	-0.18
DIFFERENCE		
V5	student self-direction	0.54
V6	student behavior	-0.35
V9	parent participation	0.17
V13	flexibility of organizational structure	-0.22
V15	grading practices	-0.38
V16	evaluation of teachers	-0.24
SATISFACTION		
V24	decision-making role of teachers	-0.19
V25	curriculum	-0.22
V26	flexibility of organizational structure	0.49
INFLUENCE		
V32	parents	-0.24
V35	secretary	-0.33
V36	board	0.51
STUDENT PROGRESS		
V38	personal growth in human relationships and self-awareness	-0.21
V39	personal conduct	0.87

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